

THE BLOOD OF THE LAND (Excerpt)

by

Angela Korra'ti

"Fall back to the house!" called the last voice that had shouted, harsh with the crispness of command. "Damn all your eyes, I said fall back!"

The voices and the tramping of feet faded then into the distant trees. Dorcas hauled in five gasping breaths, and then pulled hard at Caleb. "Come on! The way's clear!"

"Need those provisions if nothing else," he muttered, all the breath he spared as they bolted together towards their goal. He didn't otherwise argue and she loved him for it. If that thought was enough to keep him moving while the tug of the Power propelled her, she'd accept it and be glad.

But when they reached the barn door they found a trail of something dark staining the ground. Dorcas could barely see it in the gloom, yet needed neither sight nor the metallic tang in her nostrils to tell her it was blood. The sudden scream through

her nerves told her all she needed to know.

And when Caleb with trembling hands hauled open the barn door, they found the white man lying wounded inside. Dorcas sensed him even before they darted into the barn; though he lay unmoving, Power roiled around him so thickly that she could almost see and hear it. It had a voice of its own, and that voice keened of loss and agony. Behind her Caleb groaned, high and thin with fear. So did she. With this kind of Power awake in the air, it wasn't any wonder the men they'd heard thought the woods were haunted. She wasn't entirely certain they were wrong.

Yet her own Power would not be denied, and it pulled her hands to the slack body lying on the rough dirt floor. She heard Caleb scrabbling in his pockets for the matches he'd carried off during their escape, but by the time he had one lit she didn't need it. Her Power illumined the man she began to heal.

He wore a laborer's simple garb, and if the magic hadn't been on her that might have drawn her anyway--yet with the magic on her, Dorcas couldn't spare the strength to pay it any mind. As it was she noticed his disheveled brown hair and the sideburns that framed his thin face only because the shine from her hands, white as moonlight, rose up to show them to her. But they weren't important, not when a bullet in his shoulder shrieked against flesh and bone. Her magic screamed back, but before she could let it have its way, that bullet had to come out. It was a mercy that the man was unconscious, Dorcas thought

grimly. He wouldn't be aware of what she was about to do.

Or would he? As she slapped a hand down upon his damaged flesh his eyes flew open, unveiling a near-black gaze gone vacant with something beyond pain. He writhed under Dorcas' touch, and with a strength a wounded man should not have possessed, he seized her hand and cried, "I walk in the valley of the shadow of death!"

She knew the Christian prayer, knew which words came before and which behind, yet Dorcas couldn't bring herself to utter them now. There was no comfort in the rod or the staff, not when they came down upon the shoulders of those like her. "Goodness and mercy shall follow me," she said instead, praying all the while that she spoke the truth. "Hold still, man. There's a bullet in you. I'm taking it out."

The man trembled violently beneath her palm. Yet his eyes darted to her hand upon him, glowing with fractious Power straining for release, and then up to her face. His was chalk-pale, and if Dorcas hadn't felt living warmth in his flesh, she would have thought him a ghost. "Angel," he whispered. "Angel of the Lord?"

That was no question she could answer, and so Dorcas didn't try. Instead, keeping her palm in place, she wrenched her other hand free of his desperate hold and reached within her skirts to pull out the knife she'd stolen when she and Caleb had fled. To Caleb, she barked, "Help me hold him down!"

Caleb did as she bade, and though it was foolish to waste the match, he stomped it into the barn floor to free both his hands for the task before him. He dropped down on the man's other side and pinned him with ease; tired though he was from a night of running, he was still bigger than the white man, and with muscle to spare. Dorcas shot him a grateful glance, and then plunged her knife into the man's shoulder.

He screamed, though he barely had the strength for it, and the noise he made was little more than a rattle in his throat. Dorcas could spare no sympathy; it took all her will to focus on digging the round from his shoulder, to make sure her magic could have its way with no metal or powder to taint the mending flesh. Yet as she pried the bullet free, his blood welled over her fingers. With it, in an inexorable rush, came his Power.

It too was wounded, Dorcas realized in shock. It poured off him in great ragged streams, a skein of energy rent by invisible knives, so deeply that she almost expected to see bloodied furrows in his physical form. The bullet wound was no more than an afterthought compared to whatever had damaged his Power so, and her own ability haloed out from that spot as soon as it was healed, seeking to close the fraying energy. Her every muscle contracted and her blood grew hot with the demand upon her, greater than any healing she had ever accomplished--

Then without warning Caleb was pulling her back from him, enfolding her in a protective embrace. "Stop it," he urged,

sharp with alarm. "Stop it, woman, it's hurting you!"

Breathing hard, Dorcas slumped against him, aware that her frame still glowed with the healing. In that light she saw the white man scramble back from them both, his eyes round and dark with panic. "W-what are you?" he breathed.

"She ain't nothing you need to pay mind to!"

"Caleb, no." She loathed the thought of sitting up again, for the healthy, living strength of her beloved's frame was a relief after the drain of a healing. But Dorcas forced herself upright once more regardless. "He knows I ain't like anybody else. And neither is he." Eyes on the man, she added, "Are you?"

To her dismay the man began to laugh, in choked gasps that sounded a breath away from madness. The shine of her magic was starting to fade, but moonlight slanted down through holes in the ruined roof, giving her just enough light to see to inch towards him. He huddled now with his back against the broken shell of a water barrel, and he stared down at his disarrayed clothing in disgust. "I used to be Elias Sutherland," he said, and his voice was broken, rough with unshed tears. "I used to be a Warder."